

## Ruth Veletta Jones SHS 1915

-Somerville High School Graduate

-Grandniece of Frederick Douglass

-Not pictured in SHS yearbook-

-Listed as graduate in the [Annual Report of the City of Somerville 1915](#).

1. Read about Ms. Jones in the *Cambridge Chronicle* article from October 1995 (below) which notes that Ms. Jones believes that she was the first African American graduate of Somerville High!

2 Link to archive.org [Oral History](#) of the Jones family.

*\*both resources detail Ms. Jones' accomplishments and her familial connection to Frederick Douglass\**



Ruth Veletta Jones

### Keeping up with Miss Ruth Jones, age 100

BY JOHN BRENEMAN  
Chronicle Staff

**M**iss Ruth Jones, proud grand niece of Frederick Douglass, turned 100 years old on Friday, treating folks who came to visit her to a century's worth of stories.

She spread laughter through the North Cambridge house she has lived in since 1913 and shared words of wisdom through her smiling, dark blue eyes and clear, telephone operator voice.

And, of course, when a person turns 100, everyone wants to know their secret. Even 93-year-old George Alexander, quiet and dignified in his Sunday best, seemed a little curious.

"Has she told anyone the secret yet?" asked Madeline Winston, George's daughter.

But it turns out there's no big secret after all. There's no therapeutic power in the taste of ice cream she has each day. But her

faith in the Lord gives her strength and lots to say.

"I am a hundred years old because God says so and what He says no man can dispute."

Miss Ruth Jones, born in Cambridgeport Sept. 29, 1895 — "down by Charles River opposite the soap factory... that's where all black people lived" — is history bundled in a bright blue robe and soft pink-ribbon slippers.

Gray hair pulled back, a few wispy white strands on her chin, she tells about the old days with a smile on her lips and music in her voice.

Behind her a portrait of Frederick Douglass — the great author, orator, and former slave who is an ancestor on her mother's side — stares toward the door. His shock of dark gray hair looks like hers; a full beard covers his jaw. He died seven months before she was born, but Miss Jones loves to tell about Frederick Douglass.

**MISS JONES, page 12**



PHOTO BY JOHN LACKEY

**Miss Ruth Jones of North Cambridge, grand niece of Frederick Douglass, was born Sept. 29, 1895.**



# Keeping up with Miss Ruth Jones, age 100

MISS JONES, from page 1

"He brought Abraham Lincoln into power, Frederick Douglass. Taught him everything he knew. How to enter a room..."

No one disputes her connection to the great man who in 1845 wrote "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave." Her niece, Helen Jones Hatcher, though, gently suggests that sometimes her stories are more vivid than reality.

Well, says Miss Jones, slightly vulnerable, a bit sly as if caught in a tale, "half of it is true, and most of it... is." And once in a while, at times like these, she spits out a sharp breath and laughs, "Hah!"

"I'm a hundred — one, oh, oh," she says. "I don't feel a bit different. I'm happy to be alive."

"MY AUNT was the first woman in Cambridge to register to vote," says Hatcher. Miss Jones' voting days are now behind her, but that didn't stop Mayor Ken Reeves from coming by Friday with the two dozen red roses now perched atop the piano. The mayor brought an official city hall proclamation too, but he was running a little behind schedule.

"He was late," recalls Hatcher. "I said 'Mayor, you never stand up a lady 100 years old.'"

On Saturday, friends were still coming and going. Some stayed for birthday cake, a big rectangular job with butter cream frosting and a layer of chocolate inside, an orchid on top.

"This is too pretty to cut."

to give me pigmentation, I'm pleased to wear it," she says, laughing at the big word she uses to describe her color.

And, pondering the mysteries and the beauty of the world, she says to consider all these millions of people, all so different, coming from the same creator.

"Think about it. It's mind-boggling. You have to be a master to make it happen."

At the party table and at her spot in the living room sofa under Frederick Douglass, surrounded by books and pictures and friends who could listen all day, Miss Jones recalls life in Cambridge and Somerville.

Her mother, a caterer, and her father, a hard-working "night engineer" at a local factory, moved from Cambridgeport to Somerville when she was very young.

There, Miss Jones remembers, some people asked the owner of the corner building where her family lived about renting to black people. "He says 'I don't give a damn who has [the apartment] as long as they have the rent.'"

She graduated from high school in Somerville, perhaps the first black girl to do so, and then moved with her parents and brother back to Cambridge at age 18.

"IT WAS KIND of hard," says Miss Jones, whose family encountered some resistance when they became the first black people in the neighborhood. Helen Hatcher says that when her aunt's father bought the house people would "pass by and say all kinds of things to them," but the Joneses "were very strong people."



Miss Ruth Jones,  
born in 1895

*"I am a hundred years old because God says so and what He says no man can dispute."*

Miss Ruth Jones

the line of duty and curve is the line of beauty," simulating a graceful sweep of the 100-year-old woman's hand.

"She likes to talk about the olden days," says Delpha Alford.

Yes, adds Suzie Vital of Cambridge VNA, and "she told me last week the president would be coming" to help celebrate her birthday. Instead, she'll have to settle for the mayor and a mention on national TV from Willard Scott.

MISS JONES is well cared for now, and she says she's never been very sick, thanks to the Lord.

"He kept me well, never had a doctor... I didn't need a doc-



This is too pretty to eat. Miss Jones, trying to blow out several rows of hissing sparkler-style candles, the kind that even a wish-happy 6-year-old would have trouble with, says, "I haven't got much strength here, you better get me something to eat."

Then, holding a big kitchen knife to slice the cake, she teases a friend taking yet another picture, saying, "hurry up, this knife is slippin'."

**MORE PICTURES.** More questions about her longevity. "I don't know, but I think He made a little mistake," she says, wondering aloud, once again, what prompted God to give her black skin and blue eyes. "Blue is my favorite color. The Lord likes it too. He uses a lot of it," she says.

"The Good Lord said everything he made is beau-ti-ful... Since it pleased the Almighty

Over the years, Miss Jones worked for the Mass. Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and for decades as a telephone operator.

"She was the first black telephone operator in this area," says Hatcher. "She does have a strong voice." The story goes that when someone gave her boss a hard time about employing a black woman in a job that could have gone to a white, the man responded that "Miss Jones have a smile in her voice."

She certainly delights the women who come from Cambridge Visiting Nurses and Homemaker Services to care for her.

"I love it when she calls you 'doll,'" says Mary Coyne, a home health aide. "She's got me calling everybody doll."

Nurse Joy Chase says, "the other day she said 'straight is

tor. I had Dr. Jesus."

The celebration of a very full century cannot be complete until Miss Jones ambles ever so slowly behind the piano and sits down to play. The piano is topped with cards and flowers and family pictures. An old lamp lights keys she probably doesn't need to see.

She touches the ivory with strong, purposeful strokes, pressing the pedal with her right foot. She looks at her hands and then looks back to the small audience in her living room. There is applause when she stops, a trace of a tear from one of the party's organizers.

Then Miss Jones raises her hands in front of her, high over the keys, shakes out any stiffness, and plays some more, emphasizing each syllable while singing sweetly about "sal-va-tion."